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## Gestalt Psychotherapy, Conflict and Resolution: An Autoethnography

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**Abstract:** This article is based around my experiences as a gestalt psychotherapist who became a full-time mediator. I describe how I have tried to deepen the theoretical underpinning of mediation with a gestalt dialogic-relational approach, and how I have applied my own skills and experience as a gestalt psychotherapist to being a mediator. Using autoethnography as the research method, I analyse aspects of myself and my motivations, and the relationships I have had with people within the mediation field. I conclude that mediation practice would indeed benefit from a greater knowledge of relational, especially gestalt, theory. I also comment on some of my experiences of trying to introduce this much more theory-rich approach, and on how it has been received by other mediation professionals.

*Key words:* autoethnography, mediation, gestalt therapy, conflict resolution

I am a gestalt psychotherapist and the head of a mediation company. I have taken a unique step of applying gestalt theory and practice to the field of conflict resolution.

Conflict is of interest to me for three reasons. Partly, I fear it: I have an instinctual, child-like response to hide and cower when voices are raised, fingers are pointed, and blame is about to be attributed. Partly, I relish it: I have learned to walk towards conflict and to be able to manage and resolve it very effectively, both for myself and for other people. And partly, I

I have found that working with conflict suits me very well as a profession. I have for the last fifteen years run one of the larger mediation companies in the UK; training people, consulting for organisations, and mediating a wide range of commercial and interpersonal disputes.

This article describes my experiences in trying to incorporate the skills and theory of gestalt psychotherapy into the heart of mediation practice. The first aim of this work is to describe and reflect on how I, as a person, have experienced doing this, and to examine some of the relationships that have come about as part of my achievements. A second aim is to reflect on my professional practice in what is mostly a theory-light mediation field, and to consider some of the reactions I have encountered in bringing a relational focus to that field.

The study begins with a discussion of methodology, a description of my personal and professional background, and a narrative of how I have tried to apply gestalt theory to mediation. This is followed by an examination of some of the challenges, successes, and reactions I have encountered, and some conclusions and reflections.

## Method

### Research Design

Firstly, my aim is to describe and analyse a set of experiences, in a way that helps me to make sense of myself and the field in which I work (Adams, 2008). My research question is, 'What happened when I, as a psychotherapist, tried to incorporate gestalt theory and practice into mediation?' I am thereby starting with an open research question and aiming to interpret and derive meaning from my experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I am not testing any hypothesis or trying to build any kind of objectifiable evidence base about my practice (Rowland & Goss, 2000). In terms of methodology, I am inclined to use a qualitative, rather than a quantitative research method (Malterud, 2001): one that, "neither presumes that...causal relationships exist, nor tries to find them" (Giacomini, 2001, p.3).

Secondly, the research does not aim to establish any 'truths' about mediation and gestalt theory. I am not trying to distil out any invariant, replicable, cause-effect relationships about how best we should do mediation. If I were, then this would sit the research within more of a positivist tradition (Ponterotto, 2005). From that particular epistemological stance, I would be an impartial, detached observer of the work I have done. I am not. I do have a personal connection to the topic of enquiry (Etherington, 2004), and the experiences I will describe are shaped by who I am, and by the particular settings, times, and context in which I have done this work. I therefore prefer a more interpretive approach to the research (e.g. Finlay & Evans, 2009), one in which I explicitly acknowledge that my understandings and perceptions are completely dependent upon my subjectivity, and upon the unique situation from which I view this field.

Thirdly, having committed to a qualitative method, and taking interpretivism as my epistemological position, I need to choose the particular research approach to take. In making this choice, what is clear is that the experiences I want to relate have been shaped by the combination of me and the context in which I have had those experiences Bryman (2012). Therefore, I need to use an approach through which I can relate my personal experiences within the particular social and cultural setting, paying particular attention to how that setting may have shaped those experiences. This leads me directly to consider autoethnography, especially as described by Ellis & Bochner (2003), and Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011, p.1), as, "an approach to research...that seeks to analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience".

The autoethnographic approach will combine elements of autobiography: writing about my past experiences, with ethnography, in which I examine the relational practices, values and beliefs of the culture surrounding those

experiences (Ellis, 2004). The 'experiences' in this case are those of bringing gestalt theory and practice into a new field. The 'culture' is that of mediation & conflict resolution in the UK in the early 21st Century.

Autoethnography will support me to give prominence to the meaning of the events that I describe, going beyond just story-telling (Medford, 2006). In addition, I want to reflect on the quality of the personal and professional relationships that I have formed in doing the work. Spry (2001) states this is a key aim of an autoethnographic study, and also fits for me with the relational focus of the work: I am bringing a relational form of psychotherapy (Yontef, 2002) into a field focused on relationship breakdown, and I am considering the relationships that I formed a consequence of this.

And finally, with regard to methodology, I consider that I have to do more here than just relate events and discuss the meaning of those events. I am generating a self-narrative that places me into a particular social context or culture, consistent with Reed-Danahay's (1997) definition of the method. And this requires that I bring in reflexivity, or "disciplined self – reflection" (Wilkinson, 1988, p.493). As the researcher, the 'auto' in 'autoethnography', I need to be thoughtfully and consciously critically self-aware (Finlay & Evans, 2009), and to remain clear about the place that I am viewing these events from. Barber (2006) refers to the researcher, especially in gestalt-informed research, as themselves being worthy of research, and as needing to describe the "mental-set" (2006, p.3) that they start from. Also, Ellis (1999) refers to the lens that we look through when writing about events, and that it should sometimes focus inwards on our vulnerable self: the one that is moved by the events we describe. So, regarding the 'I' in my research question, the autoethnography must therefore include some conscious self-awareness, whereby I reflect on my own experiences as well as reflecting on the phenomena that I narrate.

As a starting point, then, I would like to reflect on some of the personal and professional experiences that have helped to make me who I am.

## Reflecting on personal and professional experiences

### Personal Background

I am the third son of Irish Catholic parents, who emigrated to England in the late 1950s, and who had me in 1960. I have lived in the UK for most of my life, although spent a short time in Ireland as a child.

The family environment was loving and stable, and yet included a fair amount of conflict: 'Mum' would fly off the handle when things got on top of her and/or when my very laid-back and quiet 'Dad' frustrated her. The conflict was characterised by 'Mum' yelling and occasionally throwing things, with 'Dad' cowering and retreating, and going quiet on her, often for days at a time. Conflict did not become resolved as such, but rather as time passed they would start to slowly come back into contact, sometimes with 'Dad' buying 'Mum' a small token present (which was not always welcomed!), to placate her and I think probably to deflect from the as-yet-unaddressed conflict.

So, an early point of curiosity for me is what I must take from these experiences that would influence my current work. Writing an autoethnography can be a way that we make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Kiesinger, 2002), and it is certainly true for me that my early personal exposure to conflict has had some bearing on the direction of my professional career. I am of course looking back at the past through the lens of the present (Bochner, 2000), and had I not ended up working in conflict resolution, I may not have so developed my curiosity about these early lessons.

Perhaps what I learned early on was that we can avoid conflict by hiding, that loud, aggressive expression of anger might be cathartic, but of itself does not promote healthy dialogue, that conflict resolution can happen when tempers have had time to subside, and that unaddressed conflict will, like a bobbing apple in a bucket, pop up somewhere else if we continually try and push it below the surface.

## Professional Background

After graduating in psychology and taking a master's degree, I worked for some years as a researcher, then as a manager/clinician for the NHS. Later, I trained in counselling and worked with CRUSE bereavement care, and later still, I started a private counselling practice, including supervising and training other counsellors. Then from around 1990 I ran a private company, with an international dealer network, and a team of up to twenty young developers, programmers and trainers.

The reason I describe these events is firstly to give the reader a narrative about me-as-researcher, as the one writing the autoethnography, and also to analyse certain aspects of my personal experience as a way to better understand my experience of a culture (Ellis, 2004). The culture I have entered is that of conflict resolution in the 1990s – 2000s, and my experience of doing that, as well as the ways that I make sense of that, are inextricably tied up with who I am, and where I have come from.

I want to try and extract meaning from these experiences (Medford, 2006). In the case of my industry and management experience, I think what it meant for me was a development of my organisational skills, my ability to manage people, and my resilience. All of these would stand me in good stead for some of my later challenges.

I also became a supervisor of a number of counselling and psychotherapy trainees and gained a reputation as the preferred supervisor for trainees who were failing, or who needed additional support. I developed something of a reputation for being able to challenge, and for being able to face people robustly with the need for them to change. Training institutes had confidence in me to address their failing trainees. Not surprisingly, this drew on my ability to balance support and challenge appropriately, and to sensitively manage boundaries, for example around what constituted training, what constituted therapy, and what constituted supervision.

So, as I start to describe how I began to make inroads into the field of conflict resolution, I hope I have given a brief sense of who I am, of who the 'person' is in the "researcher as a person" (Bager-Charleson, 2014, p. 80) and of the particular perspective that I might take of the world that I was about to enter.

## A Therapist Begins in Mediation

The setting here was the late 1990s, when one significant factor was that the proportion of self-employed people was rapidly rising (e.g. Office of National Statistics: [www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk)). I, like many others, looked for ways to make a self-employed living from freelance and consultancy work. So, within that cultural setting, I got interested in mediation. I trained in neighbourhood and workplace mediation in 1996, I started to offer this as a service to companies, colleges, universities and individuals with whom I already had dealings.

I straight away felt that working with conflict would be right for me. In my own therapy and supervision, I reflected on the impetus I may have felt from seeing poorly managed conflict in my birth family. But I could also see that I was able to challenge authentically, to manage boundaries well, to be clear about the purpose of differing types of 'helping' or therapeutic interventions, and to deal well with disclosure and confidentiality.

I acquired customers by sending mailshots, offering free 'taster' events, and turning up at conferences and exhibitions and trying to get to talk to decision-makers from various companies. I also did some cold-calling (door-stepping) of companies. Some of this marketing paid off in regular work with some large private companies.

There is a resilience and courage in me in being prepared to cold-call in this way, and especially in not feeling shamed and put off by the high proportion of rejections that I experienced. The prevailing culture that I was dealing with took a very adversarial approach to conflict resolution. Conversely, I was trying to promote an approach based on collaboration, dialogue, and resolving conflict for mutual gain. I had a lot of work to do in changing people's minds and got a lot of doors closed in my face. Companies, especially their in-house legal representatives, would be quite dismissive of what I was suggesting: seeing it as ineffective or splitting it off (e.g. Yontef, 1993) as 'some form of therapy'.

I volunteered for a Community Mediation Service around this time, and carried out neighbourhood mediation cases for them: resolving issues over neighbour noise, parking, lifestyle clashes, etc. Some of these disputes that people had with their neighbours were of very high conflict. People were being kept awake at night, there were assaults and criminal damage, police action, and a level of disruption that was potentially ruining people's lives and compromising their mental health.

While I reflect on these experiences, I can remember and think about some of the people, episodes, and places where I was trying to get started as a mediator. As a means of enriching understanding, however, I need to take a further step and to engage in reflexivity, not merely reflection. While reflection involves bringing events to mind and thinking about them, reflexivity requires that I, as researcher, also include an awareness of self (Finlay & Gough, 2003). My sense of the mediation world, and of my experiences of trying to enter it, are influenced by who I am and by the particular lens that I look through (Ashworth, 2003). Or, as Malterud (2001, pp. 483-484) put it: "A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions".

When I started to become a mediator, I was aware that I was someone with a good degree of skill in being able to support people in difficult situations. I knew myself as someone with the confidence to be able to challenge people robustly regarding their own behaviours. And I knew I had the insight and good timing to know how to strike a balance between these two things. I felt that I had found a great testing ground for me to try out and to develop my skills, and at a deeper level a way to address some archaic unfinished business. I think my early experiences of conflict have left me with an urge to find a better way to resolve conflict: for myself and others. The 'unfinished' part: in gestalt terms, the incomplete gestalt (Perls et al., 1951), is about finding a way to walk towards conflict, tolerating the fear but without becoming destructively aggressive.

As I would approach a house and ring the doorbell of a client who was involved in a dispute, my heart would be thumping. In part, I dreaded that the people would be about to direct their fury at me (when it really belonged with their neighbours), and in part I felt excited in anticipation of this rich encounter. I also felt a sense of incompetence at times: that I had little to offer the parties who were involved in such upsetting and all-engulfing situations. I would also wonder what they thought of me: a lot of clients would be quite dismissive of the idea that I, or our mediation service, could possibly be able to help resolve their situation. On one hand, I enjoyed the challenge of proving them wrong, but I also believed some of what they said: that actually they were right that I did not know what I was doing.

Part of me also needed convincing that mediation could possibly work, and on occasions I did feel like giving it up as a bad job. I also wondered then, and sometimes I wonder now, whether what I have done is to learn how to tolerate conflict better by getting intimately involved in other people's conflict. I still struggle to deal with some conflict of my own; I can get quite frightened of confrontation. But I relish the thought of being an impartial third party who deals with other people's disputes, however heated.

To illustrate my mediation work around this time, a case example is given, below.

### **An Early Example of a Mediation Case**

The Hopes and the Smiths were neighbours in a row of terraced houses on a busy estate. There had been problems between the neighbours for some time, and the community mediation service became involved after the local police had attended an emergency call regarding noise disturbance, threats of violence and allegations of criminal damage.

As was customary, I went with a colleague (co-mediator) to firstly visit both sides in their own homes. Both were at pains to blame their neighbours for everything and were initially reluctant to 'sign up' to mediation, doubting that it could succeed. There was some fear on both sides about whether there might be verbal and/or physical aggression, and each doubted the other's commitment to participate in good faith.

After discussion with my co-mediator we decided that, yes, we would offer a joint mediation session at our offices: with both of us and one member of each household. Mr. Hope and Mrs. Smith were to attend, partly because their partners would be at work during the day. Although we had actually let them know who was attending, when Mr. Hope saw that Mrs. Smith was there for the Smiths, he initially backed off from wanting to be in a room with her.

So, the mediation began with some 'shuttle' sessions, with the two parties sat in separate rooms and with me, the mediators, moving between them. They eventually built up to feeling safe enough to come into the same room, where we helped them to exchange views, to describe how the other's words and actions had affected them, and to think about whether there could be some new behaviour contract that might calm their dispute. Our work was in managing the sessions, ensuring we stayed impartial, helping them to listen and respond actively, and keeping the focus more on the future than the past.

Eventually a short agreement was drafted, involving preferred times of day for music, visitors, DIY and other noisy activities, plus an agreement on acceptable language, and an agreement around mending a garden fence that had allegedly been kicked over.

At the follow-up, around six weeks later, the agreement was still standing, there had been no new problems between the two, and the case was closed.

### **Broadening the Mediation Work**

Having achieved a level of competence and experience as a mediator, I then opened conversations with a number of the private companies with whom I was doing stress management work and employee counselling. I encouraged them to wonder about how they managed workplace conflict.

Generally, their workplace 'personality clashes' or instances of 'bullying' would either lead to a formal process, or else they would leave matters to fester. Doing nothing about it would usually lead to one or another party becoming ill and taking time off work. This was what they were used to and felt safe with. So, my novel suggestion, that they might try and get people talking, was mostly rejected. I was called 'airy-fairy', 'touchy-feely', and often heard the not-so-accidental confusion of 'mediation' and 'meditation'. People wanted to persuade me, one way or another, that if they could not just ignore it, then the adversarial, win-lose approach to dispute resolution was definitely the better way to go. Although expensive and often unsatisfactory, to them it was comprehensible, familiar, and had a predictable - if high - cost.

I had some resistance from, and even conflict with, people within these organisations. I enjoyed it. I could address people's reticence about mediation in some fairly mundane ways: by producing some statistics and surveys proving its worth (e.g. CIPD, 2003). However, I mostly enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of the various meetings and presentations that I took part in. I took great pleasure in arguing, mostly alone, for this more dialogic, empowering, and informal approach to workplace dispute resolution.

As part of this autoethnography, I am valuing the use of a more interpretivist paradigm, from where I can focus on intersubjectivity: what happens between me and my world (Finlay & Evans, 2009). I am looking for the "mutual meanings involved in the research relationship" (Finlay, 2003, p.6). So, in terms of the relationships I formed at this point in my narrative, I believe that I affected people who resisted what I was trying to do. They felt challenged, probably criticised, by my urging for them to do things differently, and they pushed back at me. Ultimately, however, I was to win ground in this battle, and to gain quite a lot of acceptance for my different approach.

And here I have another opportunity to turn the research lens around and to focus inwardly: not on 'events', but on the vulnerable self (Ellis, 1999). How did I influence people's reactions, and how did their reactions influence me? (Fox, Martin, & Green, 2007). With this greater reflection on self, I can go beyond just being reflective, simply recounting and considering events, and engage more in reflexivity. With reflexivity, I can explore the mutual meanings within the research relationship, or as Woolgar (1988, p.20) puts it, make "an explicit evaluation of the self".

So, as someone with a family history of being fearful around conflict, here I was now: a gestalt therapist trying to persuade reluctant lawyers and HR professionals to change how they managed workplace disputes. And in trying to elbow my way into this rigidified culture, I was experiencing dismissive, patronising, sometimes persecutory responses. And I thrived on it. I felt energised, mobilised, and ever-keen to have the next conversation or argument about how this new approach to conflict resolution was better than what they currently used. And returning to the vulnerable self, I can relate that enthusiasm to my own deeper search for an understanding of conflict that is somewhere between two polar extremes: avoiding and deflecting vs. dealing with it in an attacking or persecutory way.

A polarity of this sort is described by Zinker (1977, p.195), who contrasts "healthy and creative" with "confluent and non-productive" conflict. So, as someone who alternately fears and relishes conflict, I am looking for a way that I can understand and manage conflict for myself and in my business as neither confluent (avoiding, pretending everything is okay) nor persecutory (aggressively pursuing a win-lose outcome).

When I think reflexively about what I was trying to do with mediation, and consistent with Reed-Danahay's (1997) definition of autoethnography where the personal is placed within a social context, the questions that arise are: "How did I impact on that resistant, fearful culture/context?" and "How did that culture/context impact on me?" These questions also resonate with Wall's (2006) perspective, where we try and understand the wider culture by relating aspects of personal experience to knowledge about others within that culture.

I would say I impacted on that culture as someone with a personal and deeply held commitment to finding an alternative means of dispute resolution: one that would be efficient, non-adversarial, non-avoiding, and which would ultimately build people's relationships rather than spoiling them.

The culture impacted on me firstly by showing me that this polarity is deeply entrenched in how 'professionals' deal with workplace conflict. They either try to pretend it away, or they formalise and litigate it. This reinforced my resolve to look for an alternative. Secondly, what I experienced was how conflict could indeed make people very afraid. People who are in conflict often fear each other (Yontef, 2002; DeDreu, 2005), and organisations (Human Resources departments, lawyers, senior managers) often think they are doing "the wrong thing" by intervening in very personalised conflicts, because they carry their own fear that it could make things worse. The impact of this on me was that I felt vindicated "It's not just me, then!" However, I also felt a keenness, some joy, that I was able to invest myself so fully in this work.

The social and cultural context is also of interest here, especially concerning employee relations in late 1990s Britain. After Margaret Thatcher's three terms of Conservative government, from 1979-1990, Trade Union Membership had dramatically declined, largely due to legislation that made it very difficult for people to strike legally. From a membership of 13 million in 1979, a steep decline flattened out at around 7.3 million in the year 2000, although in September 2012 Trade Union membership did drop below 6 million for the first time since the 1940s, possibly because of declining numbers of public sector workers ([www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)).

For people working in British industry, this change was accompanied by a change in how they could address any disaffection they might have with any aspect of their working conditions or working environment. There became a lesser reliance on industrial action as a means of workers getting their voices heard, a lesser inclination to deal with that disaffection as a 'them and us' battle between workers and management, and a greater tendency, encouraged by Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and by changing employment legislation, for people to address disputes by structured negotiation within the workplace, preferably at an early and informal level.

The moment had come to introduce the idea of theory-rich mediation as a means of resolving workplace conflict, and I took what I had learned from neighbourhood mediation, along with my understanding of organisational dynamics, plus insights from psychotherapy, and started to offer mediation for workplace disputes, as well as training people in workplace mediation skills, to be able to do mediation for themselves.

## Deepening Mediation Practice with Concepts from Gestalt Psychotherapy

I did not invent mediation. There was already in existence a model of sorts (e.g. Mediation UK, 1995), and some people and organisations who were already practicing mediation. The model appeared to have come from a variety of sources, and it has been hard to say where precisely it was first used or devised. Most mediation practice at that time was in neighbourhood disputes, to a lesser extent in the workplace, and very little in the commercial (financial, contractual) world. What I and my company did was to apply gestalt theory, along with my skills and knowledge, to make a new model that became highly effective in resolving entrenched interpersonal disputes, and to promote and market this more widely.

The established Community Mediation model was probably quite effective in some circumstances, although was mostly just a procedure, consisting of a series of steps and stages. There was little theoretical basis to the model, more of an approach of, "if you try this, it should work". My experience of how a lot of people were practicing mediation was that they would follow the 'model', be relieved and even surprised when it worked, and when it did not, they would shrug as if to say, "Well, it couldn't be helped". My interest was in taking the model as a basis, enriching it with my knowledge of gestalt psychotherapy, expanding and deepening the model and how it could be applied to conflict, and coming up with a more theoretically coherent and consistent approach than had previously been practiced. The bare bones of the established mediation model were something like that shown in Table 1.

For me, there were several things that were valuable about the model, and many things that were lacking. The points of value were that:

- There was a step-by-step process to be followed, which would help the mediator to treat both parties in exactly the same way. Impartiality was emphasised as a means to reaching resolution using this model, and this could be better engendered by having this kind of route map for the mediator to find his or her way through people's conflicts.
- Meeting each party separately would help, especially as confidentiality was important to the process. Parties could say to the mediator things they would not say, or say in the same way, to the other party's face. There was a chance to offload to the mediator, to discharge strong feelings and to experience some empathy from the mediator, and to express anger and resentment that would then be less likely to leak out when the parties came together face-to-face.

- At Stage five, there was an effort to contain the dispute into a set of three or four issues. For a neighbour dispute, we might frame these as, “keeping noise levels down”, “respecting shared spaces”, or, “communicating better with each other”. In a workplace dispute, these might be, “sharing tasks out more fairly”, “valuing each other’s efforts”, or, “communicating better with each other”. This gave a sense of developing a clear definition of the task to be completed and moved parties away from feeling overwhelmed or despondent about their poor relationship.

- The impartiality that the model espoused was, again, poorly defined, and tended to encourage mediators to just sit on the fence (although a poor analogy for neighbourhood disputes!). Mediators who I witnessed managed not to overtly take either party’s side in the dispute, but this tended towards indifference, or the sort of abstinence that a psychodynamic therapist might use. (e.g. Jacobs, 2012).
- The ‘manual’ described some techniques for getting negotiations moving between the parties, but apart from ‘reaching an agreement’, the literature at the time actually had very little to say about what the practitioner was really trying to achieve, either at the interpersonal boundary, or in terms of a change in either person’s awareness.

Stage	Process
1	The mediator meets privately with the first disputing party, hearing their personal story of the conflict and of their view of the other party.
2	The mediator meets privately with the second disputing party. The content of the first party’s meeting is kept private.
3	The mediator makes some deliberations about whether to bring the two sides together, and how to plan and organise the mediation.
4	The mediator convenes a joint meeting with the two sides, behaving impartially, defining ground rules, and maintaining safety.
5	The contentious issues are jointly outlined, defined, and explored. Parties have to firstly speak to the mediator, and later they are allowed to speak to each other.
6	Negotiations are conducted, leading to an agreement
7	The mediation is concluded and closed, and the mediator de-briefs with his/her colleague/supervisor

Table 1: The basic established Mediation Model (e.g. Mediation UK, 1995)

## Gestalt psychotherapy: theory applied to mediation practice

I saw an exciting opportunity to integrate some of the theory of gestalt psychotherapy into this incomplete model. To describe how I attempted this, I want to refer to the ways that gestalt psychotherapy talks about dialogue and about the therapeutic relationship. But firstly, it may help to give a very brief and more general description of the gestalt process for readers less familiar with this model:

- ‘Gestalt’ means a whole, a form, or a configuration. We try and make patterns, wholes, or forms out of our experience, and try to make meaning out of everything that reaches our senses (Perls et al., 1951/1994).
- Failing to make meaning leaves a sense of situations or experiences feeling unfinished, and unfinished situations tend to compete for our attention until they become completed, when they finally recede and leave our attention (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951/1994).
- In therapy, the focus is on the client’s experience in the current moment, albeit that their full experiencing may be interrupted, partly by the effect of these unfinished situations.
- The therapist’s relationship with the client is key. The quality of psychological contact that the therapist has with the client, and the ways this might be interrupted, are also very much the focus of the therapy (Yontef, 2002).

For me, the things that were lacking were:

- Although the ‘model’ described what to do, there was insufficient attention paid to what I consider to be the most important aspect of conflict resolution: that of how to improve the way that the parties would come to relate to each other better. In gestalt terms, how they could come into better contact (Yontef, 2002).
- Although there was some passing reference to the need for the mediator to respond with empathy to what the parties brought, the reasons for this were very poorly articulated, and mediators I met and worked with tended to make some supposedly empathic statements in a rather insincere manner, without really knowing why.

So, straight away upon entering the world of mediation, I was struck by how some of the underlying ideas in gestalt

psychotherapy could apply so well to conflict resolution. Not least among these is the relational nature of gestalt, and how this might apply when we treat conflict as a rupture in relationship (Zinker & Nevis, 1994).

Perhaps the most concise way to discuss how I then wanted to refine the theory of mediation is with reference to the four characteristics of dialogue that define the therapeutic relationship in gestalt psychotherapy (e.g. Yontef, 1993, p. 132).

- Inclusion is putting oneself as fully as possible into the other's experience, without judgement or interpretation, while retaining a sense of one's own separate autonomous presence.

For me, this defines perfectly how the mediator should relate to the disputing client in the individual meeting. The client wants to have their experience heard and validated. I make an assumption that this client is in dispute with the other person because of a belief that he or she is depriving them of something that is important to them (peace & quiet, professional recognition, adequate personal respect, control over their living or working environment, etc.). The mediator communicates a non-judgemental understanding of the client's experience, heightening their awareness and thus helping them to clarify their immediate need. When the two disputing parties become aware of what they, and the other person, each need, they potentially become ready to negotiate a way to mutually satisfy those needs.

- Presence means bringing ourselves to the boundary with the other, where we share meaning, model phenomenological reporting, and communicate in a genuine way. In contemporary gestalt, it can be argued that the practitioner being fully present is actually the essence of the work (Gendlin, 1996), while Nevis' (1987, p.11) description of the effective practitioner seems to apply well to mediation: one who uses, "high-contact interaction and strong presence" to support the mobilisation of energy and to facilitate contact. This full engagement, more than an end in itself, allows the mediator then to be more responsive to what the client, the other, experiences. Their presence, "calls to the other" (Zinker & Nevis, p.386).

One aspect of conflict is often that, because the two parties' relationship has usually deteriorated to the point of non-communication, they start to demonise one another (Wheeler, 1996). They begin to see everything that the other person does or says as confirming their negative view of him or her. In the mediation world, this is popularly called 'confirmation bias' (Nickerson, 1998). In gestalt terms, the lack of real contact means that each party projects their view and

expectation about the other, to the extent that the projections become a fixed way of seeing the other person: in gestalt terms, a fixed gestalt. To see the other person in any other way would be confusing and threatening (Yontef, 2002; Zinker, 1977). One of our goals in mediation is to help the disputing parties to see one another as they really are, and not as they imagine them to be. The mediator's presence and high-contact interaction can model a way of being: one that can help the parties themselves to come more authentically to the boundary, and to begin to see each other more clearly.

- Commitment to dialogue is about allowing contact to happen, rather than making contact: the therapist/mediator surrenders him or herself to this interpersonal process. The practitioner empathises fully with the client's experience, retaining a sense of themselves as an authentic, present individual, and trusts that what emerges in between them will serve the goal of the encounter (Hycner, 1991). In mediation, as in therapy, it can be said that it is the quality of the contact between practitioner and client that is the most important aspect of the endeavour (e.g. Hycner & Jacobs, 1995). It is certainly my own experience in both disciplines that surrendering to that relational space between myself and the client can lead to a real and intimate understanding of the other.

Unlike in most psychotherapy contracts, we work in a very time-limited setting in mediation: usually only having a meeting with each individual of about 1½ hours, followed by a three-hour joint session. Time is often frustratingly short. Also, the field conditions are such that an employer or housing provider has paid me to get a 'resolution' to the 'dispute'. We necessarily swing between trying to achieve the goal that the fee-paying customer wants us to achieve, and truly meeting each client as a person (Hycner, 1985). In Buber's (1923) analysis of personal dialogue, what we could be said to be doing is moving between two forms of dialogue: one in which we treat the client as a means to an end, an object, an 'It', and one in which we dialogue with the client in a more mutual and reciprocal way as a 'Thou'.

- Dialogue is lived means that we do it, we don't just talk about it. Dialogue moves the energy between or among the participants.

This for me identifies one of the more exciting aspects of mediation, and possible one of the most essential: using aspects of the above model, with an awareness of inclusion, presence, and commitment to dialogue, within the safe container that is bounded by our rules and our agreed purpose, to let dialogue happen in whatever way the participants want it to happen. Working in the here and now in the crucible that we set up, to effectively experiment and see if firstly contact, and then even a resolution, will result.



## Myself as mediator, and some challenges

I found myself well suited to working as a mediator, leaning back on aspects of a well-established model, and yet bringing in a greater understanding of human relating than appeared to have ever been used by mediators. At the same time, I relished the fact that I was, and am, able to engage so fully with something that I feel so highly driven to do.

There have of course been some challenges, and some concerns of my own about what I do:

- In mediation, we get a short meeting with each party (1¼-1½ hours), followed by a joint meeting of around 3-4 hours. I sometimes wonder if it is wise to try and achieve in such a short time some of the outcomes that I would be seeking in a lengthy series of therapy sessions. Am I raising expectations unfairly?
- Especially in joint mediation sessions, I am 'driving into' people's process, especially into aspects of how they are relating to one another. While I am careful to pace the work, and to seek consent for each part of what I attempt, I sometimes think I should be doing more assessment to ensure that clients are robust enough at that time to tolerate such interventions. Is there a danger of doing harm?
- When we work with people in a one-to-one setting, in a room away from their workplace, business, or neighbourhood, are we paying sufficient attention to the wider context in which their dispute takes place? From a systems perspective, we are removing the disputing parties from the environment in which many forces are at play, some blocking resolution of their conflict, some potentially enabling it, and just looking at two people in isolation. Is this the best way to proceed?

## Applying my Learning and Getting a Reception

As I have developed my model of mediation, I have simultaneously been using the approach to both earn a living partly as a mediator, and to develop my training courses, to partly earn a living as an educator.

In the sphere of neighbourhood mediation, budget holders such as housing associations, police services, and private tenants do not care if the mediation model is based around gestalt theory or not. They are happy with my services as long as they do not have to incur the expense of evicting and re-housing tenants who take up all their time with neighbourhood conflicts.

In workplace mediation, relationships can be more intense; employers can be more enlightened, and especially with group conflicts involving five, six, or more parties, quite often the employer has already tried a few different interventions before they ask me and my associates to get involved. Human Resource practitioners, in-house counsellors, and some managers understand that we are offering something more than the norm, and our rate of repeat business is very high. Plus, it is really enjoyable work, made more so by the colleagues I work with.

## Conclusions

My aim in this article was to address, using an autoethnographic approach, the question of what happened when I, as a psychotherapist, tried to incorporate gestalt theory and practice into mediation.

I think I have described reflectively a lot of the events of the past few years as I have tried to do this. I have included elements of reflexivity (Finlay & Gough, 2003), to focus inward on my vulnerable self, and to reflect on the personal viewpoint from which I have experienced these events. I hope I have conveyed my enthusiasm for the idea of enriching mediation practice with gestalt dialogic- relational theory.

In keeping with the aims of an autoethnography, I hope I have clarified the cultural context in which I have done my work and looked at the impact of the culture on me, and the impact of me on the culture: early 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the United Kingdom, in which workplace and neighbourhood conflict are often ignored or addressed in highly litigious ways. I have described some of the resistance, dismissal, and even hostility I have encountered in trying to introduce a more relational-dialogic stance to mediation, and how some of the reactions I have received have actually energised me and increased my resolve. I think there is a lot more to say about how I and the culture have impacted on one another, and this is something I might like to unpack further.

I feel also that the reader may be left wanting to know more about what mediation actually looks like in practice. I appreciate that mediation is unfamiliar to most, and indeed I spend a lot of my professional time explaining and demonstrating what it is all about. I would like to have had space to include several case examples. Also, I am also aware that I have not fully and thoroughly described the gestalt mediation model here. Whilst this does not necessarily belong in an autoethnography, I feel it would be helpful for the reader also to access this.

In terms of where I am with this work now, I think there are some challenges and some growing edges that it may be

helpful to finish with. Firstly, I wonder whether there are limits to what can be achieved with a purely interpersonal focus when thinking about conflicts within organisations, families and neighbourhoods. General Systems Theory (Nichols, 2010) would argue that the context and wider setting in which a conflict takes place needs to form part of the practitioner's focus. Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) would tell us that all parts of a family or organisation cause and are affected by a conflict. So, all need would need to be engaged in some way in its resolution.

And secondly, I stop from time to time to check whether I am being realistic about what I hope to achieve with theory-rich mediation. In mediation, we do not have a classic therapeutic contract with clients, nor the luxury of a lengthy and regular engagement with them. I have to ensure that I am setting realistic aims within a mediation contract, in which I simply do not have the same time as we would have available to us as therapists.

Perhaps I need to think about this as brief and focal mediation. And even within that, I value working reflectively as a mediator, and I value engaging in the reflexivity that underpins this article. Being a gestalt mediator is a fine occupation for someone who has a deep-seated need to figure out a better way to manage conflict.

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## About the Author

**Dr Mike Talbot** spent the early years of his career working in the UK with people with disabilities and life-threatening conditions. He then trained in management and counselling, working in the National Health Service and in private industry. Mike went on to be an organisational consultant, where he first developed an interest in conflict and its impact on people's well-being. Mike is now a gestalt psychotherapist with over twenty years' experience in psychotherapy, training, and supervision and he obtained his D.Psych from Metanoia/Middlesex. He began working as a dispute resolver in 1999, and founded the company, UK Mediation Ltd, as a base from which to pursue his ideas about the overlap between mediation and gestalt psychotherapy. Mike works around the world as a dispute resolver, group facilitator, and mediation trainer. He specialises in working with teams, groups & organisations who are 'stuck' in conflict situations, and he runs innovative learning programmes to support people to manage their (and their organisations') own conflict better.